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# HILARY SHENFELD

SUBURBANISTA

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Dec. 18 2009 - 1:12 pm | 21 views | 0 recommendations | 3 comments

## Should you spy on your kids?

At least one mother thinks so. Her 17-year-old daughter might be alive today, she believes, had she read the teen's diary, rifled through her bedroom drawers, maybe even followed the high school senior to some of the parties she attended. But the suburban Chicago woman didn't suspect anything was amiss, until the day she received a phone call telling her that her daughter had died of a heroin overdose.



Should you read her diary? Image by kiwanja via Flickr

It was about eight years ago when I interviewed the mom for a story on how the drug was sweeping through the suburbs. She was sharing her story as a way to help other parents pick up on something she missed. Even if you think you have a "good" kid, she said, talk to them well before any potentially dangerous situation arises. But also check. Spy. Follow. This was in the days before Facebook, texting and e-mail was widespread, but wary parents say to monitor those too. Your child will probably hate you for snooping, but parents say it's worth it if evidence turns up that he or she is doing something harmful. "I'd rather have her hate me and be alive," the woman said.

Heroin use hasn't gone away in the intervening years; in fact it's not as hidden as it used to be, as its low cost and easy availability continue to make it popular. Families are still suffering, and still [seeking help](#). Now, parents who don't discover something on their own want the addict's friends to step up.

Parents also are having informal discussions whether to push for a law that would grant immunity to anyone who calls 911 to report a drug overdose. Such a law might save lives and prevent people from dumping bodies of overdose victims, but it also could let drug users off the hook.

Often, parents say, drug users are afraid to call 911 to report a friend's overdose for fear that they'll get in trouble themselves.

via [Daily Herald](#) | [Mother of suburban teen who died warns others](#).

Moms and dads still hope they can reach their kids before curiosity turns into a habit, and a habit becomes deadly. If that means spying, so be it.

But some parenting experts say snooping crosses an ethical line. "How can we

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"Some very wise comments, DJ. Thank you. I would only add that just friending your kid on Facebook might not..."  
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expect our kids to trust and respect us if we seemingly don't extend the same courtesy to them?," says Corrine Gregory, founder of [SocialSmarts](#), a program that teaches social skills. However, she told me, if parents suspect a problem, they should take a "trust, but verify" approach. Let them have e-mail and Facebook accounts, but make the kids give you their passwords and tell them you will check if necessary. Go through their drawers if you have to. "That's our job — to keep our kids safe."

[Dr. John Mayer](#), a Chicago psychologist specializing in helping families deal with teens and drugs, also says spying is wrong. "Privacy and independence are critical ingredients to the healthy development of mature young people. Giving young people privacy and independence builds mastery in them, which is a building block for self-esteem and self-confidence," he told me. The caveat, he said, is when parents do suspect some nefarious activity, and then they must check out their kid by whatever means necessary. He lists family support resources [here](#) and also has manuals for sale on his site.

It's easier to justify snooping when you have an inkling that something is not right. The difficulty comes when you have no reason to be suspicious. Some argue the mom whose daughter died should have been more tuned in, but children can be very good at covering their tracks. She says not to wait until it's too late.

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 **datajunkie**

How about a happy medium? Instead of making your kid give you his facebook password, become his facebook friend. If he suddenly restricts what you can see, you know it's time to talk. Invite your kid's friends to dinner. Instead of following your kid to a party, ask who will be there and if you don't know the first 3 people he lists, ask a lot more questions. At that age, there is at least 1 adult that your kid trusts with more information than you, because you make the rules. Find out who that person is and let them know that they can pass on information to you, and you won't reveal that you know it or act on it unless it's critical.

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3:08 pm on 12/18/09

 **HILARY SHENFELD**  
Suburbanista

Some very wise comments, DJ. Thank you. I would only add that just friending your kid on Facebook might not be enough. Yes, you can see his or her posts and activity, but you can't read their private messages, which is where I suspect the kids are exchanging the information they want to keep secret.

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I've spent years chasing cops, public officials, celebrities and the latest trends, reporting for such publications as Newsweek, People, the Chicago Tribune and the Daily Herald, based in suburban Chicago. I live close enough to one of the world's greatest cities to have witnessed Michael Jordan play, Oprah smack down a drunken mom and Charlie Trotter whip up a feast, but far enough away to mostly avoid major traffic jams, random gunfire and drive-by meth sales on my jaunts to Target, Starbucks and Ann Taylor Loft. As a suburbanite, yes, I have a minivan. Yes, I wear sweater sets. Yes, I know my way around a shopping mall. I still love you skyscraper-gazing, boutique-shopping, public transportation-taking city dwellers, but if you'll excuse me now, I have to go check on my nice green lawn.

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